NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5624 MARCH 17, 1978
DOUGLAS ROBERTS/BEIRUT

SOUTH LEBANON

ANNCR:

THE CURRENT ISRAELI OFFENSIVE IN SOUTH LEBANON IS CLEARLY THE LARGEST MILITARY OPERATION EVER MOUNTED BY ISRAEL INSIDE LEBANESE TERRITORY, BUT IT IS BY NO MEANS THE FIRST. DOUGLAS ROBERTS IN BEIRUT HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

SOUTH LEBANON HAS REPEATEDLY BEEN TRANSFORMED INTO A BATTEFIELD OVER THE PAST DECADE WITH INNUMERABLE ISRAELI STRIKES IN RETALIATION FOR PALESTINIAN GUERRILLA ATTACKS FROM BASES INSIDE LEBANESE TERRITORY. IT IS AN AREA OF GREEN HILLS AND VALLEYS IN THE CENTRAL AND WESTERN SECTOR WITH THE TERRAIN GRADUALLY BECOMING MORE RUGGED IN THE EAST TO THE SLOPES OF MOUNT DURMON.

MANY OF THE YOUNGER SOUTHERNESS HAVE EMIGRATED, SOME TO SPRAWLING SHANTI TOWNS AROUND BEIRUT AND OTHER LEBANESE CITIES, WHILE OTHER JOURNEYED TO THE OIL-RICH STATES OF THE ARABIAN PENINSULA. REMITTANCES FROM THOSE EMIGRANT WORKERS ARE VITAL FOR MANY FAMILIES IN THE SOUTH.

JUST AFTER THE NINETEEN SIXTY-SEVEN MIDDLE EAST WAR, PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS MOVED INTO THE SOUTH LEBANON WHERE THEY ESTABLISHED BASES AND BEGAN TO LAUNCH RAIDS INTO ISRAEL. THESE WERE FOLLOWED INEVITABLY BY ISRAELI RETALIATION, ESTABLISHING A PATTERN OF VIOLENCE THAT HAS CONTINUED FOR MORE THAN A DECADE. ANALYSTS HERE CALCULATE THAT THERE WERE MORE THAN THREE THOUSAND ISRAELI ATTACKS IN SOUTH LEBANON BETWEEN NINETEEN SIXTY-EIGHT AND NINETEEN SEVENTY-FOUR. AMONG THE LARGEST WAS A TWO-DAY STRIKE BY ISRAELI TROOPS IN SEPTEMBER OF NINETEEN SEVENTY-TWO

FOLLOWING THE MURDER BY PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS OF SEVERAL ISRAELI ATHLETES DURING THE OLYMPIC GAMES IN MUNICH. THE SITUATION BROUGHT ABOUT REPEATED CRISIS BETWEEN THE GURREILLA LEADERSHIP AND THE BEIRUT GOVERNMENT.

IN NINETEEN SIXTY-EIGHT, FOLLOWING A TYPICAL ISRAELI RETALIATORY RAID IN THE SOUTH, THERE WERE CLASHES BETWEEN THE GUERRILLAS AND THE LEBANESE ARMY. A SERIES OF AGREEMENTS BETWEEN LEBANON AND THE P.L.O. WERE SIGNED TO REGULATE LINKS BETWEEN THE GUERRILLAS AND THE GOVERNMENT HERE AND RESTRICT GUERRILLA ACTIVITIES. BUT THESE BROUGHT ONLY TEMPORARY LULLS AT BEST AND TENSION MOUNTED.

THE SITUATION IN THE SOUTH AND STRAINS IN LEBANESE SOCIETY BROUGHT ON BY THE GUERRILLA PRESENCE HERE WERE CERTAINLY MAJOR FACTORS LEADING TO THE OUTBREAK OF CIVIL WAR IN THE SPRING OF NINETEEN SEVENTY-FIVE, IRONICALLY, THE SOUTH WAS SPARED DURING MUCH OF THAT CONFLICT AS THE RIVAL FACTIONS FOUGHT HERE IN BEIRUT AND IN THE NORTHERN AND CENTRAL PARTS OF THE COUNTRY.

THE PEACE-KEEPING TROOPS WERE KEPT OUT OF THE SOUTH BY ISRAELI WARNINGS, AND THE REGION HAS BEEN IN ARENA OF SMALL-SCALE BUT CONTINUED FIGHTING BETWEEN RIVAL LEBANESE AND PALESTINIAN FACTIONS FOR MANY MONTHS. UNTIL THE LATEST ISRAELI OFFENSIVE, SOUTH LEBANON WAS THE ONLY PART OF THE MIDDLE EAST WHERE PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS WERE FREE TO LAUNCH ATTACKS ON ISRAEL. NOW, ISRAELI FORCES HAVE CAPTURED MOST IF NOT ALL, OF THE MAIN GUERRILLA BASES IN THE AREA, AND PREMIER BEGIN SAYS ISRAELI FORCES WILL NOT WITHDRAW UNTIL THERE IS AN AGREEMENT TO KEEP THE GUERRILLAS OUT OF THE BORDER ZONE.

JS/PY